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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN POLITICS II #8: CHASING THE RED ROOSTER
- A SCRAMBLE FOR ELECTORAL ALLIANCES

11. (SBU) This is the eighth cable in a series reporting on the second year of the administration of Dominican President Leonel Fernandez.

Chasing The Red Rooster -- A Scramble For Electoral Alliances

Back-room talks on possible party alliances that began last month are provoking heated commentary, a sure sign of pre-electoral fever. In the country's triad of major parties, every political chief dreams of organizing a coalition of two against one, to sweep the elections and rake in jobs and public money for the party faithful. Speculation now centers on the third-ranked PRSC, the late President Balaguer's Reformista Party, whose emblematic red rooster is coveted as a partner in the 2006 mid-term elections by both the ruling PLD and the main opposition PRD.

Ever since 1996, when Balaguer formed the Patriotic Front with the PLD and propelled President Fernandez into office for his first term, other parties have eyed the Reformistas as potential kingmakers. They drew less than 9 percent of the 2004 presidential vote, and three years after Balaguer's death their depleted ranks retain only 12-13 percent of the electorate. But that would be enough for the PRSC to serve as a swing vote to bolster the ruling PLD's rickety Congressional and municipal representation or to shore up the eroding base of the scandal- and faction-ridden PRD as the main opposition party. Both leading parties have made tempting offers to the Reformistas.

Some Reformistas are resisting. Former PRSC presidential candidate Eduardo Estrella has consistently spoken out against alliances and said the party should continue its firm opposition to the PLD government; PRSC vice president Luis Toral has taken up this cry, emphasizing the party's "identity and dignity." PRSC president Federico "Quique" Antun announced November 10 that the inter-party talks had been "suspended for the moment."

But the PRSC rank and file, weary of having spent nearly a decade in the opposition, wouldn't mind having another chance at returning to power -- or at least sharing it. A poll published November 14 showed that 76 percent of Reformistas favor an alliance with another party for the Congressional and municipal elections next May. Eduardo Estrella's former campaign advisor, ex-minister Victor Gomez Berges, has admitted to political officer that "there is great pressure" from party members on this issue. According to PRSC Congressional spokesman Ramon Rogelio Genao, "We need to unite our efforts in search of a national project that will result in a development plan for the next 20 years, regardless of the color of the party that happens to be in the Government." He added that the poll had provided data on which alliance might be "most beneficial" to the PRSC and said the party leadership would publish these findings at an appropriate time.

An alliance with the ruling PLD would appear to be the PRSC's first option. Many Reformistas felt cheated after the 1996 election victory when, they complained, their coalition partner the PLD excluded them from getting their expected share of the spoils. They branded the PLD as "comesolos" -- solitary diners who hogged the opportunities for public employment and patronage. Last year, a small but prominent group of Reformistas, led by Carlos Morales Troncoso, broke with the rest of the PRSC to support Fernandez and gained four senior government jobs. Another member of this group, National Housing Bank president Leonardo Matos Berrido, has confirmed publicly that the group will back the PLD in 2006. Matos referred to the precedent set by Balaguer, who never in his many elections allied with the PRD, which he regarded as the PRSC's arch-rival. Balaguer agreed to link up with the PLD as the only means to prevent the PRD from winning the presidency.

The PLD, with far fewer legislative seats or municipal governments, has been generous in the initial offer by presidential chief of staff Danilo Medina and colleagues: a

proposed coalition slate would have 16 Reformista senatorial candidates out of 32, 60 candidates of 178 for the lower house of Congress, and 60 of 150-some mayoral candidates. By comparison, the PRSC currently has 2 senators, 35 congressmen, and 11 mayors. The PLD even offered to let Reformista Johnny Jones (currently the party's pre-candidate for mayor of the capital) run instead for the post of senator from the National District. This would mean PLD secretary general Reynaldo Pared Perez would drop out of the senatorial race (and Pared Perez was in the meeting). Reformista congressional spokesman Deputy Victor "Ito" Bisono told political officer November 15 that PRSC political committee is actively considering the PLD offer.

The top PRD leadership is now engaged in a special working group on the issue, including former President Hipolito Mejia and 2008 presidential aspirant Miguel Vargas Maldonado. The PRD dominates Congress, controls most of the nation's city halls, and is loath to negotiate away those advantages. Their latest offer to the Reformistas is calculated to match that of the PLD: 12 senatorial candidacies including those of the National District and the province of Santo Domingo (which make up the capital metro area) and the candidacy for Santiago, the nation's second city; 70 candidates for the lower house; and 50 mayors. The latter figures "could be increased in the framework of the talks." PRD National District chairman Cesar Cabrera has commented to us that, while the PLD might offer more economic advantages to the Reformistas, the party could derive more political benefit from going with the PRD. As part of a united opposition, the PRSC would be free to formulate its own criticisms of the Fernandez administration, and Reformista candidates could draw on their party's own proposals during the campaign. As of November 17, PRD secretary general Orlando Jorge Mera, who is involved in the talks, was privately optimistic his party would clinch the deal with the PRSC.

Similar negotiations prior to the 1998 and 2002 mid-term elections proved fruitless. However this comes out, Reformistas are facing the reality that without their beloved caudillo, the party is an also-ran. An alliance would enable the PRSC to shrug off pejorative remarks about its becoming a "comodin" (joker) in Dominican politics and reaffirm its tradition as the party that has ruled longest since Trujillo. But the embrace of either the PRD or especially the PLD could prove to be suffocating for the debilitated PRSC.

12. (U) Drafted by Bainbridge Cowell.

13. (U) This piece and others in our series can be consulted at our SIPRNET web site (<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodomingo>) along with extensive other material.
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